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The Impact of Academic Research

On Character Formation, Ethical Education,
and the Communication of Values
in Late Modern Pluralistic Societies



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Acknowledgments	7
Preface to the Series	9
Character Formation and Moral Education in Late Modern Pluralistic Societies: An Interdisciplinary and International Research Project	
<i>William Schweiker</i> Introduction to the Present Volume	13
Part One Academic Work and Ethical Concerns in Research Universities?	
<i>William Schweiker</i> The Idea of a Research University	23
<i>Andreas Glaeser</i> Analyzing Actually Existing Ethics	39
A Hermeneutic-Institutionalist Approach	
<i>Bernold Fiedler</i> Absolute Truth—A Toxic Chimera?	65
<i>Rüdiger Bittner</i> Can Academic Research Be a Moral Guide?	89
<i>Michael Welker</i> Joy of Discovery—Respect for the Search for Truth—Honesty ..	99
The Blessings of a Global Network of Research Universities	
Part Two Character and Ethics at the Intersection of Disciplines	
<i>Jörg Hüfner</i> The Impact of Science on Ethics	109

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Inhalt

Acknowledgments

In this book, twelve scholars from different academic fields in the natural sciences, humanities, social sciences, theology, and mathematics explore the impact of academic research on character formation, ethical education, and the communication of values in late modern pluralistic societies. The focus on research naturally requires special attention to the variety of tensions inherent in the modern research university as it has developed over the past two centuries.

The book began with a consultation in Heidelberg in the spring of 2019 and is part of a larger project that includes volumes on the impact of the market, the impact of law, and the impact of religion on character formation, ethical education, and the communication of values in late modern pluralistic societies. Six more consultations are in the planning phase.

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<i>Michael Kirschfink</i>	
Ethical Considerations in Biomedical Research	119
Welcome Guidance or Unwanted Restrictions to Scientific Progress?	
<i>Gary S. Hauk</i>	
Academic Bondage and Social Transformation	131
The Case of American Universities and Slavery	
<i>John Witte Jr.</i>	
The Educational Values of Studying Law and Religion	153
<i>Andreas Schüle</i>	
Emergence of Truth	169
The Interplay of Science and Theology in Genesis 1 and Psalm 104	
<i>Stefan Alkier</i>	
Forming Identity by Scripture	179
<i>Celia Deane-Drummond</i>	
Forming Research Scientists?	197
Developing Practical Wisdom and Virtue in Multidisciplinary Academic Frameworks	
Contributors	211

Joy of Discovery—Respect for the Search for Truth—Honesty

The Blessings of a Global Network of Research Universities

Michael Welker

The Confusing Variety in the Search for Truth at Late Modern Research Universities

Can academic research contribute to character building, ethical education, and the communication of values in late modern pluralistic societies? The answers of the contributions in this volume range from strong skepticism to marked affirmation. What they have in common is that they do not reduce academic research to the empirical research of the natural sciences, but rather focus on the German concept of *Wissenschaft*, “which includes social science, jurisprudence, and the humanities as well.”¹ The diversity of academic disciplines brings with it various processes of the search for truth and makes the talk of “the one and absolute truth” appear as a “toxic chimera.”² This diversity calls into question the invocation of the one “continuum of rationality” as well as classical ideas of “the university.”³

Modern research universities offer a variety of processes of methodically ordered search for truth. They are always looking for “interesting truths”—truths that are often connected with the idea of successful technological, medical, or even military applicability and also promising academic careers (cf. Bittner and Schweiker). According to Schweiker, modern universities formed “intellectual silos, lacking communication with other silos.” This argues against the assumption that academic research can be considered a formative force in a broad internal and external ethical and moral orientation.

¹ See the contribution of the philosopher Rüdiger Bittner, “Can Academic Research be a Moral Guide?,” in this volume.

² See the challenge of the mathematician Bernd Fiedler, “Absolute Truth: A Toxic Chimera?,” in this book.

³ This is argued by the theological ethicist William Schweiker in his contribution to this volume, “The Idea of a Research University.”

This view is shared only to a limited extent by the contributors to this volume. On one hand, the theoretical physicist Jörg Hüfner explicitly states: "ethical education was not part of my duty"; on the other hand, he clearly recognizes that ethical questions have also strongly pushed into the physicist's horizon, because "the science of physics is not an island, separated from the rest of the world." With respect to character formation and ethical impacts, he underscores the importance of "honesty and potential ethical restrictions to research."⁴ Michael Kirschfink takes a similar view in his chapter, "Ethical Considerations in Biomedical Research: Welcome Guidance or Unwanted Restrictions to Scientific Progress?" In scientific research, it is important to prepare students for difficult ethical and moral decisions, even if the general conditions for these decisions can change.

For about thirty years, research universities have worked increasingly against silo formation. More and more international and interdisciplinary collaborative projects are emerging on more or less significant issues that cannot be meaningfully addressed by one discipline alone. The perspective on and of the research personalities and the students is also changing. In all their efforts to achieve scientific objectivity and the obligations to do so, they are seen as participants and actors and thus also as ethically challenged academic researchers.⁵

A particularly impressive example is the development of the research field of law and religion. Research programs on the relationship of these two disciplines—a matter of course for centuries—had become obsolete in modernity. Over the past thirty years, however, research centers, institutes, and programs on the subject of law and religion have developed at fifty universities around the world. John Witte names countless interdisciplinary, political, cultural, and interreligious conditions for this development.⁶ It goes hand in hand with questions and expectations regarding contributions to the shaping of human character, ethical education, and the communication of values, especially in late modern pluralistic societies. The ethical impact of academic research is particularly evident in the context of studies of historical and aesthetic complexes of themes that touch on permanently explosive ethical concerns or currently pressing problems. Gary Hauk offers an impressive example.⁷

Whereas the questions of moral impact of academic research were long posed only by conservative religious educational institutions (so Schweiker, University

of Chicago), a research university with high reputation like the University of Chicago is now developing a Center for Practical Wisdom with the theme, "Character Education in Universities."

"Developing Practical Wisdom and Virtue in Multidisciplinary Academic Frameworks" is the subtitle of the contribution by biologist and theologian Celia Deane-Drummond in this volume.⁸ She has been working for years on topics in the dialogue between theology and science and focuses on ethical tasks of theological and scientific research. This interest also applies to the contributions of the Old Testament scholar Andreas Schüle and the New Testament scholar Stefan Alkier. Schüle examines exegetical-historical continuities and discontinuities between biblical classics in the treatment of the theme of creation (Genesis 1:1–31 and Psalm 104:1–30).⁹ Alkier asks about Christian identity-building processes in terms of the New Testament and practical theology.¹⁰ Common to all contributions is that interdisciplinary questions also have ethical implications and impulses.

"Truth-Seeking Communities" and "the Multimodal Spirit of Truth"

In numerous dialogues between theology and the natural sciences, John Polkinghorne and I have asked what characterizes "truth-seeking communities" in science and religion. We have come to the insight that the search for truth is, on one hand, the search to condense and consolidate certainties, and also the search to obtain agreement and thus the broadest possible consensus. On the other hand, the search for truth is a search for rational and coherent expertise, which must then be differentiated and deepened. Both approaches—the search for certainty and consensus and the search for coherent expertise—can irritate each other, but this makes the search for truth a dynamic and fruitful process.¹¹

The university-organized scientific search for truth investigates truth claims, acknowledges them or falsifies them, and thus delivers proven truth findings until further notice. Due to the mutual control of specialized scientists and the sharp sanctions (for instance, loss of reputation) against presenting untenable truth claims as truth, organized science represents an important defense system

⁸ Celia Deane-Drummond, "Forming Research Scientists? Developing Practical Wisdom and Virtue in Multidisciplinary Academic Frameworks," may have influenced the Chicago project by her publications and research projects.

⁹ Andreas Schüle, "Emergence of Truth: The Interplay of Science and Theology in Genesis 1 and Psalm 104."

¹⁰ Stefan Alkier, "Forming Identity by Scripture," in this volume.

¹¹ John Polkinghorne and Michael Welker, *Faith in the Living God: A Dialogue* (London: SPCK, 2001; 2nd ed. Wipf & Stock, 2019).

⁴ Jörg Hüfner, "The Impact of Science on Ethics," in this book.

⁵ So Schweiker in the final section of his chapter in this book. In an impressive metaethical sociological approach, Andreas Glaeser argues that "human beings are *thoroughly* instituted beings," responding to and generating a multitude of institutionalized processes: "Analyzing Actual Existing Ethics: A Hermeneutic-Institutionalist Approach."

⁶ John Witte Jr., "The Educational Values of Studying Law and Religion," in this book.

⁷ Gary Hauk, "Academic Bondage and Social Transformation: The Case of American Universities and Slavery," in this volume.

against scientific error and fraud. As Jochen Taupitz, professor of law at Mannheim and Heidelberg, summarizes:

The self-imposed system of mutual checks and balances is one of the essential characteristics of science and scholarship. Science and scholarship constitute an autonomously corrected system committed to the attainment of knowledge that includes the entirety of the previously acknowledged and accepted findings of humankind that have been critically tested and indeed are perpetually accessible to critical testing. Research as the fundamental methodology of science and scholarship is thus committed to the goal of attaining secured knowledge of the objects of its examinations through methodical and systematic study that in its own turn is similarly accessible to testing.¹²

Through its importance in the education of people who want to take on leadership responsibility in all areas of society, science carries its truth ethos and the spirit of truth into all living conditions. Its heartbeat is the universities, which combine research and teaching worldwide and train qualified future research personnel with examinations and doctorates.¹³

Accuracy, certainty, consensus, coherence, appropriateness, tested and proven claims to knowledge—these are some of the final criteria in the evaluation of truth claims in the context of the search for truth. They carry different weight in different fields of knowledge. I have suggested that these differences help us appreciate the “multimodal spirit of truth,”¹⁴ which is expressed in a plurality of sustainable forms of truth claims. This multimodal spirit includes but surpasses the bipolar spirit displayed in the search for truth through so-called common sense and the simple processes of empirical research, a bipolar spirit which strives for correspondence between exploration of objects and perfection of thought.

The examining, judging, and truth-claiming or truth-claims-rejecting spirit of research is an important, but not the only, part of the organized scientific system. Another area is the lively teaching in exchange with ever new generations of students, but also the communication of enthusiasm for the work of research. Re-

¹² Jochen Taupitz, “Das hohe Gut der Wissenschaftsfreiheit: Forschung zwischen Erkenntnisgewinn und Risikoproblem,” *Forschung und Lehre* 26 (2019): 446–47, here at 446.

¹³ Thus the characterization offered by the jurist Joachim Lege in “Die Herzkammer der Wissenschaft: Das Wissenschaftssystem braucht ein Zentrum, das bahnbrechende Erfindungen mit dem wissenschaftlichen und gesellschaftlichen Konsens vermittelt; Das können nur die Universitäten sein,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Sept. 19, 2019, no. 4.

¹⁴ Cf. the second and the fifth of my 2019–20 Gifford Lectures: *In God's Image: An Anthropology of the Spirit*, translated by Douglas W. Stott (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021); in the following I take up some parts of these lectures.

search processes are supported by the effort for a creative, in-depth search for truth. The fact that in modern research universities technological success interests, monetary incentives to raise research funds, and possible career advantages can play an additional role in this process should not allow the passion of the search for truth and the critical and self-critical passion in the verification and control of truth claims to be underestimated.

It has also been observed, and rightly so, that some groundbreaking innovations have occurred not within but outside the organized scientific community. But this does not speak against the high value of a globally organized science system. In a powerful “latent pattern maintenance,”¹⁵ university-organized science holds up the globally institutionalized examination of truth claims, the defense of proven truth claims, and in the process the manifold scientific efforts to achieve new “interesting” and, in various respects, fruitful insights into truth. The importance of this enormous achievement, which cannot be overestimated, usually becomes apparent only in extreme cultural and political crises.

The Ethical Relevance of Respect for Truth

The multimodal spirit of truth has an ethical significance that extends far beyond the realm of science and radiates into the whole of society. The Berlin philosopher Volker Gerhardt considers it a “danger to Western civilization” that the current president of the United States of America consistently disregards truth in an effort to cultivate his own image, claiming to do so, moreover, for the sake of doing what is allegedly economically best for his country. Massive amounts of incorrect information and assertions are sent out into the world in the guise of “truths.”¹⁶ Gerhardt also observes, however:

as desperate as the situation indeed is, this presidential renunciation of truth has accomplished one good thing, namely, bringing to an end within a few weeks the dismissal of truth that for much too long had already been viewed as unsurpassably modern (or even as already “postmodern”). Whereas until the spring of that year [2017] attributing any meaning at all to “truth” was considered a sign of unequivocal backwardness, there is now a rush to remove any and all doubt about the indispensability of truth not only in “marches for science,” but also in academic circles.¹⁷

¹⁵ See Talcott Parsons, *The Social System* (New York: MacMillan Free Press, 1964), 55–58 and 99.

¹⁶ By July 13, 2020, the *Washington Post* had listed twenty thousand false assertions that Trump had disseminated since taking office in January 2017.

¹⁷ Volker Gerhardt, “In Vergessenheit geraten: Über die Unverzichtbarkeit der Wahrheit,” in *Forschung und Lehre* 24 (2017): 754–56, here at 755. Concerning the enormous de-

Gerhardt justifiably insists that people had “underestimated the moral significance of truth while overestimating its metaphysical status.” When the will to assert serious and resilient truth claims is abandoned, we lose our moorings in thinking, acting, and interacting. It is precisely the “relativity of the human experience of the world” and the “variety, contrariness, and even enduring irreconcilability of positions that must make us conscious that, indeed, nothing is more urgent now than to hold fast to truth.”¹⁸

“Holding fast to truth” is not a simple operation. It requires dealing with differing and even conflicting truth-claims, developing, differentiating, and qualifying them.

Dramatic Conflicts Between Claims to Truth and the Necessity of their Qualification (the Case of Galileo)

Alfred North Whitehead showed how important it is to qualify statements that claim the truth for themselves in the famous case of Galileo Galilei, a dramatic dispute about the truth:

Galileo said that the earth moves and that the sun is fixed; the Inquisition said that the earth is fixed and the sun moves; and Newtonian astronomers, adopting an absolute theory of space, said that both the sun and the earth move. But now we say that any one of these three statements is equally true, provided that you have fixed your sense of “rest” and “motion” in a way required by the statement adopted. At the date of Galileo’s controversy with the Inquisition, Galileo’s way of stating the facts was, beyond question, the fruitful procedure for the sake of scientific research. But in itself it was not more true than the formulation of the Inquisition. But at that time the modern concepts of relative motion were in nobody’s mind; so that the statements were made in ignorance of the qualifications required for their more perfect truth. Yet this question of the motions of the earth and the sun expresses a real fact in the universe; and all sides had got hold of important truths concerning it. But with the knowledge of those times, the truths appeared to be inconsistent.¹⁹

The Inquisition supported the perspective of common sense, to which, in some parts of the world, the children’s mnemonic rhyme still applies even today: “The

structive power of such a cynical attitude toward truth and accuracy within the weave of politics, the media, and the broader public sphere, see also Romy Jaster and David Lanius, *Die Wahrheit schafft sich ab: Wie Fake News Politik machen*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2019).

¹⁸ Gerhardt, “In Vergessenheit geraten,” 756.

¹⁹ A. N. Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953; paperback ed. 2011), 227–28.

sun rises in the East, turns South at midday’s feast, in the North it’s never seen, in the West it sets serene.” The Inquisition supported the perspective of sensual certainty, which goes hand in hand with a strong claim to truth: “Everyone can see that the sun rises in the east!” Of course, from today’s point of view, there is a certain irony in the fact that the Inquisitors, especially—as representatives of the Christian religion, which, with its claims to truth, such as the belief in the Resurrection, challenges common sense and sensual certainty—strove for just this common sense and sensual certainty in order to strengthen their position and oppose the new scientific findings of astronomy. To this day, as is well known, the church has not recovered from the loss of trust that accompanied its decision at that time—not to speak of its use of violent powers to silence Galileo.

The Galileo case also throws light on the limited power of (sensual) certainty when it comes to seeking and defending truth. The assertion is not tenable

“that truth is accessible to human beings solely in the mode of *certitude*; ... (one cannot assert that) truth is accessible to us only to the extent that we are fully aware and convinced of the truth. At the same time, such certitude can exhibit widely varying gradations and be accompanied, challenged, and called into question to varying degrees by doubt.”²⁰

Despite this important restriction, such “*certitudinal* orientation,” or the linking of truth to certainty, remains problematic,²¹ for a great many acts performed within our conscious lives are sustained by knowledge of truth quite without the more or less explicit elimination of irritation and doubt that allegedly characterizes our sense of certainty.²² Humans live constantly trusting not only countless “correctnesses” supported by personal certainty but also numerous “correctnesses” supported by proven claims to truth that are not backed by personal certainty. The claims about the degree to which correctnesses have to be proven can vary, leading to their viability being disputed. This applies to the consensus theory of truth, which is based on the fact that a large number of certainties are coordinated with one another. It is also true for the coherence theory of truth, which considers the consistent connection of findings and statements to be necessary for making claims to truth.

²⁰ Wilfried Härle, “Das christliche Verständnis der Wahrheit,” in *Wahrheit, Marburger Jahrbuch Theologie* 21, ed. Wilfried Härle and Rainer Prenel (Leipzig: EVA, 2009), 82, 61–89.

²¹ Thus Julian Nida-Rümelin, *Demokratie und Wahrheit* (Munich: Beck, 2006), 45, accompanied by the warning that “certitudinalism promotes intolerance,” 46.

²² Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein’s reflections and meditations on the complex weave of presuppositions and conditions that necessarily accompany the notion of certainty, in idem, *Über Gewissheit*, Werkausgabe, vol. 8 (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1984), esp. 140 ff.

The realization is important that no personal search for truth—but also no scientifically supported search for truth—is able “to claim that it achieves absolute certainty beyond the possibility of any further refinement or correction. Rather, its achievement will be gaining a degree of understanding which is sufficiently insightful in its explanatory character for its acceptance to be something to which it is entirely rational to commit oneself.”²³ The “toxic chimera” of the one absolute truth (Bernold Fiedler) must be replaced by the realization of the multimodal spirit of truth in its differentiated individual and institutionalized manifestations.

The great ethical blessing—for society as a whole as well as for individuals—which emanates from globally organized academic research as a critical and self-critical creative search for truth, truth-testing, and truth-defense, should not be underestimated. Such a system combines the organized, tireless search for interesting, illuminating, life-furthering, profitable truths by way of practices and strategies of examining, testing, approving, and refuting truth claims: a huge defense system for the sake of lasting reliability, integrity, and honesty.²⁴

Part Two Character and Ethics at the Intersection of Disciplines

²³ John Polkinghorne, “The Search for Truth,” in *The Science and Religion Dialogue: Past and Future*, ed. M. Welker (Frankfurt a. M.: Lang, 2014), 53–59, here at 53.

²⁴ I am most grateful to the physicist Jörg Hüfner and the mathematician Bernold Fiedler for their comments on my text.